

# MAGNIFICENT BUTTERFLY: *Papilio homerus*

Vladimir Kachan, Belarus

Butterflies are airy and flying flowers on Earth. Their beauty is so stunning and inspiring that the love and admiration for them in some people gives rise to the desire to preserve this tenderness and lightness for a long time.

In the largest remaining stretch of tropical forest, deep in the hills of Jamaica, flies a giant among butterflies, the rare and endangered the Jamaican Giant Swallowtail (Figure 1). Threatened mostly by habitat loss through bauxite mining, this majestic butterfly has become the delicate ambassador of this still pristine habitat. As the largest species of the genus *Papilio* in the world and the largest butterfly in the Western Hemisphere, this rare butterfly once inhabited most of Jamaica (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) but has now dwindled into only two tiny populations: an

eastern population, found where the Blue Mountains and John Crow Mountains merge, and a western population in Cockpit Country. It is the largest of the true swallowtail species in the Americas with wingspan up to 15 centimeters and arguably one of the most spectacular butterflies in all of the world. The Jamaican Giant



Figure 2 Stamp of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on May 4, 1964 (Scott #223)



Figure 3 Jamaica 1964 with shift blue color on the right hindwing wing of butterfly *Papilio homerus* - variety



Figure 4 Jamaica 1964 with blue omitted from hindwings of butterfly *Papilio homerus* - error (Scott #223a)



Figure 5 Jamaica 1964 with overprint on March 3, 1966 ROYAL VISIT MARCH 1966 (Scott #249)



Figure 6 Jamaica 1964 with overprint 5c C-DAY 8th September 1969 (Scott #283)



Figure 7 Vertical pair with major error (huge downward shift of black)

Swallowtail is a colourful butterfly (Figure 8), with bold and distinctive broad yellow bands on a black background, large tails, and hindwings trimmed with iridescent blue scaling. The Jamaican Giant Swallowtail butterfly is endemic to the island of Jamaica. Historically, it has been recorded from seven of Jamaica's fourteen parishes.

The grandeur of the Jamaican Giant Swallowtail has inspired artists since its discovery by Western culture. The Jamaican Giant Swallowtail was first described by Danish entomologist Johan Christian Fabricius (not from a specimen, but from a painting by English naturalist William Jones, who was among the early supporters of the Linnean Society and a great authority on butterflies), and who, awestruck by its beauty, named the butterfly *Papilio homerus* in honor of the Greek poet, Homer, the

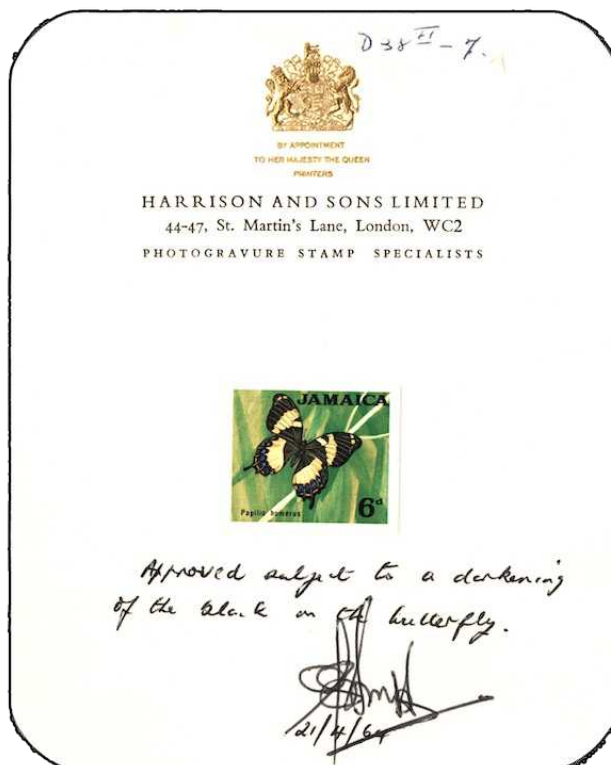


Figure 1 Jamaica imperforate proof depicting the butterfly *Papilio homerus* and approved on April 21, 1964



Figure 8 Jamaica 1975 original essay with butterfly *Papilio homerus*

author of "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey." Even before Jones' paintings, *Papilio homerus* was the subject of paintings by English naturalist and a fine entomological artist Henry Seymer (1768) and collaborative paintings with his son, Henry Seymer Jr. (1773). Three years after the description by Fabricius, the German entomologist Eugenius Johann Christoph Esper illustrated *Papilio homerus* in his series of booklets, "The Butterflies" in "Illustrations of nature with descriptions".

According to historical information, recounting the circumstances of its original description, this magnificent *Papilio* was among the number of rarities of the insect race which Fabricius met with in the Entomological Cabinets of the English Naturalists. Fabricius' description account is, however, based on a painting, and not directly on a specimen. Fabricius saw the drawing of this insect in the Collection of Paintings formed by the ingenious hand of the indefatigable and liberal naturalist William Jones, and was so delighted with its grandeur that he determined to define the species by an appellation more than usually superlative (Figure 10).



Figure 10 Stamp of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on September 7, 1970 (Scott #310)

But where did Jones get access to the specimen of the Jamaican Giant Swallowtail that he painted and who collected it? The English captured Jamaica in 1655. The original material of *Papilio homerus* was probably collected by English explorers and brought to Britain sometime after 1734. Painting of William Jones images of *Papilio homerus* was made 1783–1785. It was also indicated Jamaica as its origin, noting as very rare species (Figure 11).

Since its description by Fabricius in 1793, *Papilio homerus* has been a highly prized butterfly. The Giant Swallowtail is representative of a unique tropical group of



Figure 12 Stamp of St. Vincent 1998 with endangered butterfly *Papilio homerus* (Scott #2543)

swallowtail butterflies and is found nowhere else in the world except Jamaica (Figure 12). *Papilio homerus* is the largest species in the genus with a forewing length that averages 75 mm, and some reported female specimens have a forewing length of 90 mm. The sexes of *Papilio homerus* are similar in coloration and pattern and the females are larger in size. The dorsal surface of the forewing and hindwing has a base color of dark brown to blackish with a broad, yellow discal band extending across both wings (Figure 13). Adult Jamaican swallowtails can soar at high

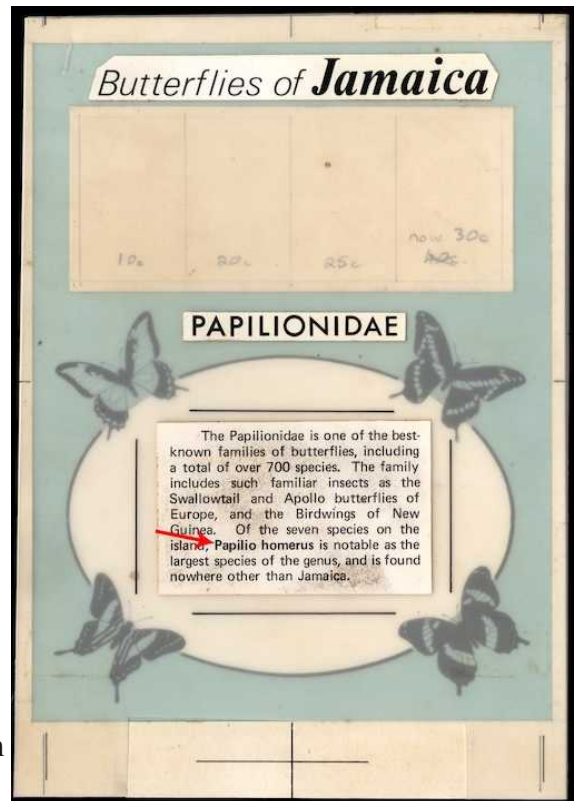


Figure 9 Jamaica 1975 butterflies miniature sheet mock-up



Figure 11 Stamp of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on August 25, 1975 (Scott #401)



elevations (up to 550m) rapidly gliding along wind current. Butterflies are observably active during all months.

Like virtually all butterflies, the Giant Swallowtail helps to pollinate flowers in the adult stage, helps recycle minerals in vegetation in the larval stage, and provides a food source to numerous insectivorous birds and mammals as well as many other rain forest inhabitants.

Aesthetically, its majestic beauty and majestic flight is virtually unmatched by any

other New World butterfly species (Figure 14, Figure 15).

It adds a source of richness to the human observer's experience in Jamaica, and can

serve as a powerful symbol of Jamaica's autonomy, the Jamaican lover of nature and the environment, and the extensive protected area system in Jamaica.

In its endemic Jamaica, the butterfly simultaneously serves as an icon of national pride and a need for



Figure 14 Jamaica 1975 butterflies miniature sheet essay

conservation efforts. Over the past half century, the Jamaican swallowtail has been featured on various postal stamps (Figure 16). In the face of rapid habitat destruction from human disruption and illegal collecting, the Jamaican swallowtail is listed on the Threatened Swallowtail Butterflies of the World by the International Union for Conservation of Nature 1985 (Red List) and is protected under international and national level legislation. Given the small number of adults left and the dwindling habitat, the species is considered and protected as a threatened species in various ways. The species is legally protected by the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species 1987



Figure 13 Souvenir sheet of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on August 18, 1994 (Scott #814)

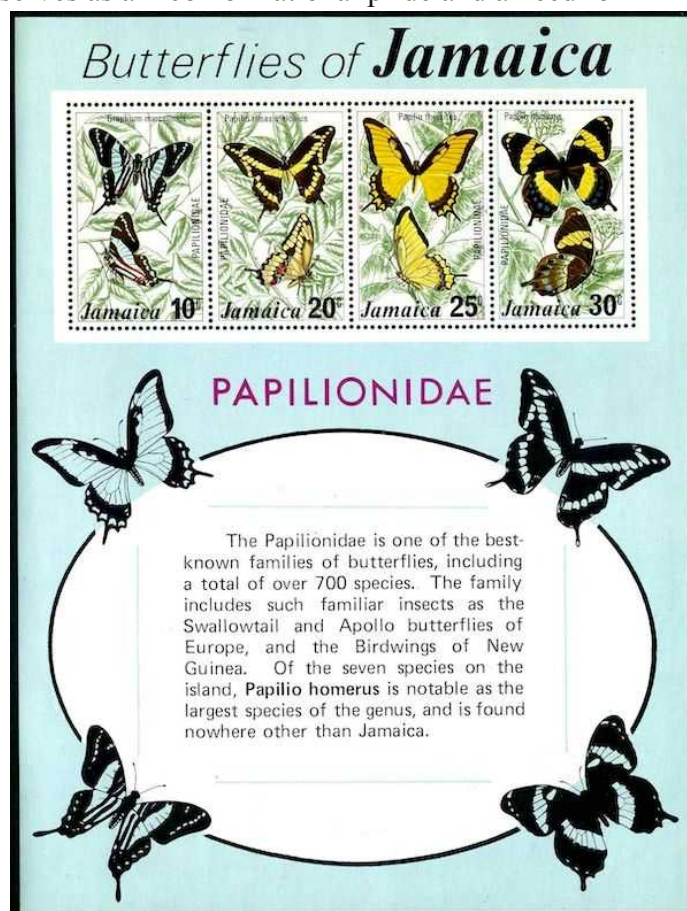


Figure 15 Miniature sheet of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on August 25, 1975 (Scott #401a)



Figure 16 Set stamps of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on August 18, 1994 (Scott #810-13)

under CITES Appendix 1 and the Jamaican Wildlife Protection Act of 1945 (amended 1988).

The range of this enigmatic butterfly, possibly less than 10 km<sup>2</sup> for each of the two remaining populations, continues to dwindle, particularly due to habitat

destruction and recent mining initiatives. In addition, the extant populations of *Papilio homerus* (Figure 17) reside in areas of Jamaica famous for their difficult terrain, which further confounds the ability to perform the long-term field studies necessary for understanding the biology and population dynamics for this species.



Figure 18 Stamp of Jamaica with butterfly *Papilio homerus* issued on October 28, 2016

The smooth outlines of the butterfly and the original shape of the tails make *Papilio homerus* a model of excellence in the richest world of Papilionidae. This “unofficial” national butterfly merits full designation as Jamaica’s official National Butterfly (Figure 18).

The Author is ready to help for philatelists in creating of philatelic exhibits on butterflies and moths. His address: Vladimir Kachan, street Kulibina 9-49, Minsk-52, BY-220052, Republic of Belarus, E-mail: [vladimirkachan@mail.ru](mailto:vladimirkachan@mail.ru)



Figure 17 Proposed butterfly *Papilio homerus* design by Phillip Hart in 1952